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Holobionts: Making and Living through Squirrealism

by Carollyne Yardley



About the Artist

Carollyne Yardley is an interdisciplinary artist researcher who lives and works as an uninvited guest on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded Coast Salish territory of the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations (*Lək̓ʷəŋən* speaking peoples). Her research-creation practice is informed by a years-long relationship with native and introduced urban animals whose territory includes her home. She has presented her work in venues including Fazakas Gallery (Vancouver), Madrona Gallery (Victoria), and has exhibited across Canada in Montréal (Papier Montréal), Victoria, Vancouver, and Toronto, as well as internationally in Seattle. She holds an MFA (2021) from Emily Carr University of Art and Design.

Holobionts: Making and Living through Squirrealism

Carollyne Yardley

tlayilela is a Kwak'wala word for "changing from one thing to another"...

taminas is Kwak'wala for squirrel.

—Rande Cook¹

Holobionts: Making and Living through Squirrealism (2019) are a series of twenty-three interspecies assemblages—each piece operates both as an individual holobiont and as a more extensive expression of symbiosis. The assemblages consist of found organic remnants collected from around the base of a deciduous tree inhabited by tree squirrels. The artworks are informed by my years-long relationship with native and introduced urban animal neighbors, also called synanthropes, whose territory includes my home. Synanthropes are species that carve out their existence within human-modified environments and are ecologically related to humans; however, they are often viewed as pests.

As Henry W. Kendall suggests, humans forget about caring for these critters during conversations that discuss environmental damage inflicted by deforestation, climate change, and species loss (Kendall 2000). In the meantime, cities continue to densify and expand into the natural landscape. With the ongoing loss of biodiversity in both cities and forests, modern species loss is “reaching a rate of 140,000 species per year” (Demos 2017, 93). Feeling frustrated by these extinction statistics, I decided to venture outside and search for squirrels who are described as “living fossils” (Emry and Thorington 1984, 23). Fossil research shows how squirrels have lived on Earth with relatively the same morphology for 160 million years (Bi et al. 2014). Therefore, squirrels give me hope for earthly survival.

Theorist Lynn Margulis refers to an ecological assemblage, such as a plant or animal, and microorganisms that live in symbiosis together as a *holobiont* (Haraway 2016, 60). Feminist philosopher Donna Haraway takes up M. Beth Dempster’s term *sympoiesis* to continue this thought, describing how our lives and the lives of other species intersect (Haraway 2016, 60). According to Scott F. Gilbert, “our ecosystems are managed by symbiotic consortia” (Gilbert 2021). Thus, urban animals and humans are multi-species holobionts living in transactional zones that are always moving, working, and shapeshifting in a literal becoming together. While searching for tree squirrels, I began to ask how an animal-human sympoiesis speaks to a mutual agency, permeable boundaries, and the emergent transformation of things and affects.

The term *Squirrealism* is a neologism that borrows from science and surrealism to document an alliance toward the squirrel. In this sense, Squirrealism is an open-ended word that I took up and developed years ago after an interspecies boundary was crossed when I held a dying squirrel in my hands. Used as a methodology, the term employs walking, collecting, and storing materials, and psychometry—an intuitive form of sensing to write through the materials. In my practice, I seek to uncover knowledge through touch in order to speculate the future through current evidence. As Mikel M. Delgado and Lucia F. Jacobs argue, squirrels are especially intuitive and can tell by sense of touch if they hold a worthy nut (Delgado and Jacobs 2017).

My research takes up the theme of Squirrealism in order to channel conceptual and material connections between species systems to think, and make, sympoetically. For example, the genesis for working with human hair first emerged in *My Hair Squirrel Mask* (2012–2018), a needle felted mask I made to explore what it would be like to be a squirrel in a tactile sense. In this work I used my own hair to create a furry outer layer (see Fig. 1). Human hair is bioregional with global implications—human hair waste is found in every locale globally.

Holobionts (2019) borrows from Haraway’s idea of sympoiesis by intertwining human and nonhuman materials to create an artistic expression of animal-human symbioses / sympoiesis (see Fig. 2–5). Through a process of multi-day walks, I began looking for tree squirrels and their known symbionts—mature nut and seed-bearing trees. Eventually, I located squirrels sitting high up in the tree branches and started collecting organic remnants from around the tree’s base as evidence of holobionts occupying real space in symbiosis together: magnolia petals, squirrel hair, leaf skeletons, seagull feathers, tree branches, and acorns. Invoking Squirrealism, the remnants found by chance were collected from the ground and stored for future use, thus interrupting any intentional aesthetics idea. Historically, the use of chance was prominent in the process of found materials to create assemblage. Still, rather than only being seen as the juxtaposition of

new forms, these assemblages can also be read as evidence for species currently living here on Earth.



Figure 1. *My Hair Squirrel Mask*, 2012–2018. Detail. Photo by Carollyne Yardley.

Making Process

Drawing from a kind of intuitive field research that moves from the field to the studio, I held the magnolia petals, tree branches, and human and nonhuman hair in my hands. I thought about each remnant's molecular structure. A series of steps followed. Using psychometry² to receive impressions about each species material history, I began a process I call *writing through the materials*, which references artist Erika DeFreitas' "writing through the object" (DeFreitas and Fisher 2019, 1). I argue that this is an intuitive form of sensing by interpenetrating multi-species materials to create an artistic expression of human-nonhuman sympoiesis.



Figure 2. *Holobionts* series, 2019. Details from series: Squirrel human hair, wax, seagull feather, oak tree branch, acorns. Photos by Carollyne Yardley.

The materials for this project are the detritus from human and nonhuman organisms, as opposed to anthropogenic materials. Using drop spindle and needle felting techniques, I also spun and interlocked the multi-species fibers together, which reminded me of a DNA molecule's double helix structure. Both of these weaving techniques are associated with humans working in sympoesis with animals' fibers. Moving quickly and in tune with the matter, I used the spun human-squirrel-hybrid hair as yarn, and rolled and tied magnolia petals to my fingers, transforming flower remnants to nail-like claws.



Figure 3. *Holobionts* series, 2019. Details from series: Squirrel human hair, wax, seagull feather, oak tree branch, acorns. Photo by Carollyne Yardley.

The finger extensions elicited a sense of embodiment that existed beyond the borders of my body. My hand became unfamiliar to me; my new claws-as-fingers began to scrape and dance on the table. I remembered how I am double-jointed and started flicking and clicking these long claws together. My fingers, the magnolia petals, and the human-squirrel hair all merge (see Fig. 4). For a moment, I wished these claws were strong enough to scale a tree.



Figure 4. *Becoming Squirrel*, 2020. Detail. Photo by Carollyne Yardley.

I begin to find meaning in the embodied experience. Upon reflection, I argue that this process has a connection to surrealist artists working with *interference apparatus* techniques such as automatic writing or drawing (Iversen 2010, 24; 25). Perhaps this technique could be seen as *intraference apparatus*, borrowing from Baradian terms, where all the materials have agency (Barad 2007, 141). Working with this theory, I experiment with psychometry as a way to collaborate with the organic remnants.

Squirrealism is an open-ended word that anyone can use. I began this project by looking for tree squirrels; however, you may choose, or perhaps be selected, to think-with another species.



Figure 5. *Holobionts* series, 2019. Exhibition at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo by Carollyne Yardley.

Exhibition

The installation features multiple species that are intersecting. Each of the twenty-three assemblages are attached to the wall with a T-pin resembling those used by entomologists today. I found myself again thinking at the molecular level and asking: Where do the materials begin and end? For instance, hand, face, paw, and genitalia made

from needle-felted human-squirrel hair; an impregnated human-seagull brooch; squirrel-human-leaf skeleton; magnolia petals wrapped in human-squirrel-hair act like fingers—now became detached claws. Much like a fractal, or a collage, the structural boundaries



Figure 6. *Holobionts* series, 2019. Exhibition at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photos by Carollyne Yardley.

have now become blurred, made ambiguous, and the joining of unexpected materials creates a surreal juxtaposition of elements. For example, the materials are disparate yet familiar, human and nonhuman hair, petals, acorns. But together, they emerge as uncanny and unfamiliar. These are new ecological assemblages with “thing-power,” and an emerging aesthetic dimension of collaborative, surreal entanglements of human-nonhuman worlds (Bennett 2009, 15).

I see these assemblages as a way to work with found materials and intuitively speculate a co-relation with those who emerge from damaged worlds. Squirrels, for instance, need mature nut or seed-bearing trees; therefore, I have become passionate about saving the remaining Garry oak trees in cityscapes. I think that it is important to pay attention to the ever evolving, shape-shifting environment and listen to what it has to tell you.

Notes

¹ In conversation with Rande Cook regarding a two-person solo booth at Art Toronto 2017 via Fazakas Gallery, Vancouver, BC to name collaborative mask *Tlayilela Mask*, 2017, and painting *Tlayilela*, 2017 by Rande Cook and Carollyne Yardley. Rande’s grandmother, Florence, provided word *tlayilela* for shapeshifting.

² Psychometry involves “touching an object in order to precipitate clairvoyance” of human-made artifacts to derive “details about an artifact’s historical contexts and events associated with its use, as well as the emotions of people connected with it, are discerned” (Fisher 2019, 11).

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